Stand Firm

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Glenda Simpkins Hoffman
Ephesians 6:10-20

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In September, I watched the news and was praying a lot because Hurricane Harvey was overwhelming Texas. Then came Irma in Florida and Maria in Puerto Rico. One of the things that surprised and alarmed me was the images of reporters out in the winds, but I was also in awe of their courage and determination to stand in the storm to keep the world informed about what was happening.

The image of a storm spoke to me when reading this passage because life can feel like a storm. There have been so many bad news stories—not only of storms, but incredible violence, ongoing political discord, and many accounts of sexual harassment and assault.

And, then, there are the personal challenges that many are dealing with, including grief, illness, broken relationships, and the ongoing demands of family and work. While we would like life to be sunny, warm, and calm, it can often feel like the dangerous, relentless winds will never stop blowing and might even knock us down.

I love how those who suffered the effects of Hurricane Harvey have clung to the slogan “Texas Strong.” Even the Astros put patches on their World Series uniforms. There is a commitment to courage and perseverance to overcome and to love and help others to build again.

As Paul begins his final words in Ephesians, he is aware of the winds that are blowing in the early church—winds of opposition and persecution. And he also knows that when things get hard, people can get down. There are real dangers of discouragement and defection and martyrdom. Though Paul himself is a prisoner and in chains facing an uncertain future, it is remarkable that there is no hint of fear or anxiety in this letter. He encourages the churches by saying, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his mighty power.”

Notice the use of three related words: “Be strong.” This isn’t pulling up our boots straps and asserting our wills in our own human strength. This is being “Jesus strong” as we trust in the risen, reigning Lord and the King of the universe. Strength is found in surrendering to his love and relying on his grace to accomplish for us what we could not accomplish on our own.
The “mighty power” of the Lord enables us to “stand firm.” Paul repeats the word “stand” four times, encouraging us to stay steady and stand our ground in Jesus:

“that you may be able to stand” (v. 11)
“that you may be able to withstand” (v. 13)
“having done everything, to stand firm” (v. 13)
“and stand therefore” (v. 14)

Life is difficult. Winds will blow. There will be many cultural realities that will seek to pull us away from the truth revealed in God’s word. There will be people and opportunities that might influence us to compromise what we believe. There will be circumstances beyond our control that will seem to push us over. But Paul calmly and deliberately says in his own way, “Stay on your feet. Don’t get distracted. Don’t give in. Stand firm.”

Actually, Paul ends his letter where he began. We are to stand firm in the place of blessing that we are already immersed in every moment of every day of our lives and for all eternity. What can we hope to add to what He has already done? In a world that tempts us to believe it’s all up to us, we are invited to live in this unqualified blessing of God’s unconditional love and amazing grace. We are invited to stand still and take it in. Stand firm in the presence of God.

As one spiritual director has said, “We cannot attain the presence of God. We’re already totally in the presence of God. What’s absent is awareness.” The Great Banquet is an incredible experience that always helps me to gain a deeper awareness of God’s presence. Since serving on the weekend two weeks ago, I have been singing the song “Holy Spirit” and making a breath prayer of the refrain; “Let us become more aware of His presence. Let us experience the glory of goodness.” How do we become more aware of His presence? How do we stand firm?

We stand firm in the Person of Christ. To stand in the grace-filled presence of the Lord is a choice. Becoming more like Christ and living a Spirit-filled life is a choice. We don’t drift into a deeper life with God, but we do drift away from it. To be strong in the Lord and to stand firm
requires intention as we cultivate our interactive friendship with God. We do this the same way we cultivate any relationship—by spending time together and sharing conversation. We listen to God as we read, study, and meditate on His word. We talk with God through prayer. The Spirit works through the word and prayer to help us become like Christ—people who can stand in the world amidst the storms of life.

We also stand firm in the Body of Christ. It is in the church that we experience the gift of a place and a community. It is in the church where we hear the word proclaimed and receive grace in the company of friends around the Table of the Lord. It is in the church where we dare to take off our masks and be real with God and each other. We can come just as we are—broken, hurting, sinful, and rebellious people who need healing and forgiveness. In the body of Christ, there is a place for us—to learn, grow, be transformed, make spiritual friends, and find our place to live out our relationship with God with others and be a part of something bigger than ourselves—to be a part of God’s unfolding plan of reconciling the world to Himself.

I have been helped so much by Eugene Peterson’s book, Practice Resurrection: A Conversation in Growing Up in Christ. I have relied heavily on his insight for this sermon, and I want to share a rather long quote, but it is important for understanding what Paul is trying to say: “The message to the Ephesians is a solid orientation for the entire Christian church in the conditions created by God in Christ through the Spirit for a life of growing to maturity in Christ. This is a dependable place to stand. This is solid ground. Conditions here are favorable to growing up to the ‘measure of the full stature of Christ.’ Stand firm.

“We live in an advertisement culture in which new products are continuously presented to us. This is a culture of built-in obsolescence. Nothing is designed to last. In order to keep the economy healthy, we are conditioned to respond to the latest as the best: a new car, the latest fashion in clothes, the breakthrough model of computer, the newly-published best-selling novel, the just-discovered miracle diet. We have no sooner bought or tried one thing than we are off to the next. Quickly bored, we are easily diverted from whatever we have just purchased or the book that we have not quite finished or the church we joined two months ago. Highly-skilled and lavishly-budgeted attention-getters target us tirelessly. Every “latest” is overtaken by another “latest” in dizzying succession.

“When this novelty-mentality seeps into the church, we start looking for the latest in God, the latest in worship, the latest in teaching, the best
preacher in town. Church-shopping is epidemic in America. When religion as novelty spreads, maturity thins out. The well-established and much-verified fact is that following Jesus is not a consumer activity.”

I’m not usually good at remembering jokes, but I have never forgotten the one I heard Garrison Keillor tell almost 20 years ago: Sven became stranded on a desert island for 10 years before a ship finally rescued him. As Sven showed his rescuers around the island, one asked, “What are all these buildings?” Sven said, “Well this is my house. This is my barn. And this is my church.” One asked, “What is that building way over there?” Sven replied, “Well, that’s the church I used to go to.” It’s funny, but disturbing as well.

Paul has made it abundantly clear that we must not perpetuate our spiritual adolescence by indulging a compulsion for spiritual novelties. “We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine….we must grow up” (Ephesians 4:14-15). Those verses are the center of the book of Ephesians. The question is how do we do that? How do we grow up? That is what Ephesians is about as is the conclusion: Brace yourself. Keep your footing. Stand firm in the Person of Christ and the Body of Christ.

Paul goes on to name the enemy that is more than human; it is spiritual, cosmic. But Jesus is Lord over the heavenly and earthly realms, and he has already won the victory in his life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We do not need to fear. Having said that, we must not be naïve. Evil is real, and there are enemies of God and His people.

We are to stay alert: “Stand against the wiles of the devil.” The Greek word for wiles can also be translated “methods,” the ways that the devil does things. Again, I found Peterson’s book helpful here. He writes, “You
can’t see a method, a way—you see only what it accomplishes. The evil of
the way is concealed in the perceived benefits of the achieved goal.

“Compare this to Jesus, who tells us, ‘I am the way, the truth, and the
life’ (John 14:6). Jesus doesn’t trick us into anything, doesn’t scheme to
get us to follow him. It is all one organic whole: way and truth and life—
all visible, personal, out in the open, revealed. Not so with the devil,
where everything is abstract, impersonal, disguised as good—evil
concealed in a method that you can’t see….evil that doesn’t look like evil;
evil that is disguised as light…. We don’t know exactly what the ‘powers’
consist of or their essence. We can only recognize this evil through its
functions—dehumanizing, death-dealing, alienating. Where do we look
for this faceless, bloodless, difficult-to-detect evil?”

“Marcus Barth articulates the
consensus of the church
when he directs us to
look for the principalities and powers in
‘those institutions and
structures by which
earthly matters and
invisible realms are
administered….It is not as if the institutions are evil in themselves, but
they provide a cover for the ‘spiritual forces of evil….’ The larger the
institution and the more public relations care is taken to maintain its
reputation for good (running the country, making
money, administering justice, organizing religion,
caring for the sick, etc.) the more hidden the evil
and the more difficult to detect and do something
about it.”

Marcus Barth

Money, language, and technology are good things in themselves, but
money can become the idol of Mammon, language can be debased into the
lies of propaganda, and technology is often depersonalized into a world of
non-relationship. This is how good things have been used in ways that are
dehumanizing, destructive, and alienating.

Examples of this abound in the news. Think of the many women who
have courageously come forward sharing the harassment and even abuse
they have suffered by men in powerful positions in a variety of institutions
where this went on for years. We hear regularly about people who will do
anything to hang on to the positions of power or use resources to satisfy
human greed rather than meet human need. And though technology is an
amazing communication resource, it is also the way that pornography has
become a multibillion-dollar industry and the way that Isis finds its new recruits.

Evil is real but often hard to detect. We are under attack, and it would be easy to sink into panic and paranoia or become defensive and offensive in trying to do everything we humanly can. But Paul makes it clear that there is another way.

Keep calm and put on the whole armor of God. We can take our stand as Christians, acting and believing about who we really are in Christ. We are called to recognize and cultivate our unique identity as the people of God living under the Person and Lordship of Christ in the body of Christ that is the church.

Paul gives us a representative sampling of what the life we are to put on looks like with these words: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Word of God. In contrast to the “wiles of the devil,” none of these things are a way to do anything. They are gifts of grace that are reflective of who we are and they are meant to be lived out in relationship with God and in relationship with each other. These are six words that are descriptive of the incarnate Jesus, who is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

Paul chooses to link each of these terms with an item of military armor, sharpening our sense of danger and the urgency involved in the battle between light and darkness—good and evil. Evil is real, and we are engaged in a battle that requires our full participation.

But Paul’s metaphor makes sure we don’t interpret these things as exterior to us, something we can put on and take off, things we can do or not do. The armor of God is the embodiment, the internalization of the life of the Trinity—truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, Word of God. This is Christ in us, the hope of the glory. Again, the armor is redefined in terms of who we are, not in what we do.

Life in Christ is not passive. Each of these qualities forms an arena of participating in Christ’s work of redemption. This is not a job description or strategy we are to implement. But let me say again, we are not given weapons to use. In Christ, we are the weapons. These words reflect who
we already are in Christ as we live out our true identity as we actively participate with God in what He is doing in the world.

Those of us in Growing Your Soul recently read about Dorothy Day, a woman who poured out her life and love for others. The terrible poverty that ravaged our country during the Great Depression galvanized her into a life of advocacy for the down-and-out in New York City. She said, “As we come to know the seriousness of the situation, the war, the racism, the poverty in our world, we come to realize that things will not be changed simply by words or demonstration. Rather, it’s a question of living one’s life in a drastically different way.”

She worked her entire life in poverty and obscurity, actively opposed by government and much public opinion. Dorothy Day shows us what it looks like to stand firm in the person of Christ, the body of Christ, and the work of Christ in the world in a way that was indeed drastically different.

Paul’s final words in this letter really help us understand how we stand firm in the world and against the wiles of the devil, even how we actually put on the armor of God. “Pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication. To that end keep alert and always persevere in supplication for all the saints. Pray also for me, so that when I speak, a message may be given to me to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it boldly, as I must speak” (Ephesians 6:18-20).

Prayer is not a skill that needs to be learned. It’s not something we try harder to do. Prayer is living in an interactive relationship with God. To pray is to let go and let God take over through the power of the Spirit so
that we experience in our real, everyday lives what is already true of us in Christ.

Paul has modeled conversational prayer throughout this letter, and now he calls his readers to engage in prayer for all the saints. We are in a community of brothers and sisters—real people, real relationships that require us to be alert and attentive and prayerful.

Last week, Pastors David and Connie Jordan-Haas very honestly and courageously asked for the prayers of this congregation for the challenges in their family. I trust many of you are praying for them.

I ask you to pray for our entire staff, many of whom are experiencing various personal challenges but continue to serve the Lord and this church faithfully.

I have been so grateful to be in this passage and had the chance to apply it yesterday as our family experienced some strong winds in a new storm. Our youngest son, Ian, woke up yesterday unable to stand or walk. My husband and I spent the afternoon and evening with him as they did tests to figure out what was wrong. During his MRI, I held on to his toe so that he would know and be assured that I was present with him. But I was keenly aware of the Spirit being present too and holding on to me. I was praying constantly and text-ing family and friends asking for their prayer support as well. The doctors are not exactly sure what is going on, so I ask you to pray for his complete healing and recovery. I know many of you have need for prayer, and as always we invite you forward at the end of the service.¹

Paul himself is suffering in prison—probably facing death. But his prayer request is that he will speak the gospel message boldly. Let’s all ask each other for prayer. And let us as a church commit ourselves to pray for boldness in proclaiming the gospel in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.

Given Paul’s final words, it seems the best thing we can do to end this service and our series on Ephesians is to take time to pray in the Spirit. We will have several minutes of prayer while the music is playing in the background to engage in prayer conversations with God.

- Pray for the needs of those you know personally.
- Pray for the Jordan-Haas family, and Ian, and for our entire staff.

¹ Afternote: Ian was diagnosed with transverse myelitis. He was treated with steroids and antibiotics and returned home after nine days. We are grateful for the exceptional medical care Ian received. The medical staff had never seen someone recover so quickly. We attribute the speed of his recovery to the prayers of so many and give glory to God for His mighty power.
• Pray for those on the prayer page, especially those who are grieving or ill.
• Pray for all of us to be bold in sharing the Good News of Jesus’ coming this Advent and Christmas season.

Let’s pray. We thank you, O God, that we are immersed in blessing. And we thank you for the privilege of praying in the Spirit at all times. We come now to pray for the saints. Hear our prayers.